Reinventing USAID?

An Interview With Steven Sinding

Steven Sinding directed the USAID Mission to Kenya from 1986 to 1990. He also directed population programs at USAID from 1983 to 1986 and at the Rockefeller Foundation from 1991 to 1999. Now a professor of public health and international affairs at Columbia University, he is leading a project designed to rethink the delivery of American foreign assistance and has submitted a proposal to the Bush administration to overhaul USAID and revamp assistance to less developed countries.

Recently PT asked Sinding to elaborate on his ideas. Below are excerpts from that interview.

Q: Tell us about the project you're involved in, and how you propose to change foreign assistance.

A: The project is called New Perspectives on Foreign Aid, and it's funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. We have a very distinguished advisory committee made up of people who have formerly been in charge of aid programs both in this country and elsewhere, former members of Congress, former ambassadors—people with a broad perspective on foreign aid who have guided the project at every stage. The proposal we submitted to the administration is sort of an interim report on the three-year project.

As for the proposal, what we are talking about is an entirely new way of thinking about aid: partnerships between U.S. and developing country institutions that harness the great capabilities of institutions in the United States to the resolution of global problems that threaten global peace and stability—the renewal and spread of communicable diseases, continued population growth, and the destruction of ecosystems, for example—through programs that build the capacity of developing countries to plan and sustain their own development efforts.

The first part of this proposal is a major shift from providing aid to specific countries to focusing on global issues, where the logic of addressing the

Continued on page 8

Faith-Based Foreign Aid Challenged *Continued from page 3*

issue will determine the nature of assistance that would be provided in any particular country. With this shift, we would no longer take upon ourselves the task of trying to "develop" other countries. We would leave that to international institutions like the World Bank, which are better suited to the task of advising on macroeconomic policy and financing large-scale development projects.

The other parts have to do with fostering long-term partnerships for capacity building. If one accepts that we are going to focus on particular problems that are global in nature, then there is still the question of where the U.S. comparative advantage lies vis-a-vis other donors, both bilateral and multilateral, and in the overall hierarchy of needs, what the developing countries need most that we're best able to provide. And part of my argument is that the technical and scientific cooperation that helps to build the capacity in those countries to design and sustain their own development efforts is where our help is likely to be most effective and most appreciated.

Q: Why present the proposal now? Is it an opportune time, or has foreign aid reached its nadir?

A: Well, in some ways both. It's a time of a new administration and a change of government. And that's often the best time to get new proposals heard and taken seriously. I have a longstanding interest in trying to bring about substantial changes in the way we administer the foreign aid program—a program that really has its origins in the Cold War. I believe that the United States has responded less explicitly and less imaginatively to the huge changes that the end of the Cold War brought about than almost any other donor country and that, as a consequence of that, we have moved from the leadership position among the donor countries that we held for many years to one in which we're intellectually behind the curve.

Q: Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., has proposed abolishing USAID. What do your proposals have in common, and how are they different?

A: Helms seems to feel that the abolition of USAID and its incorporation in the State Department is a crucial action in its own right. I don't feel that way. I think there are strong arguments for combining certain aspects of aid administration with the State Department, and equally strong arguments or perhaps even stronger arguments for retaining a certain degree of independence. I advocate a serious reorganization of the way in which foreign aid is administered. But I leave open the question of what sort of an agency ought to do it and what its relationship to the State Department ought to be.

The second point of disagreement is that Helms construes the new foreign assistance program that he's advocating as basically being block grants to nongovernmental organizations, particularly faith-based organizations. I strongly disagree with that. Foreign aid has to be about more than simply making block grants to NGOs. There is a government-to-government aspect, and there is a strategic aspect to foreign aid that has to be taken into consideration.

I think that more extensive and imaginative use of NGOs is an important consideration, but it should not be the be-all and end-all of the foreign aid program—far from it. I think that kind of for-

mulation completely excludes from consideration scientific and academic institutions, the private sector (the for-profit private sector), and a lot of other institutions in American society that have a great deal to offer and a tremendous desire to be involved in international development work.

Q: Does the Bush administration's reinstatement of the Mexico City policy make it more or less likely that your proposal will be taken seriously?

A: I don't think that there is necessarily any relationship between Bush's decision to reimpose the Mexico City policy and the prospects for aid reform. I think that members of the administration are able to keep these issues quite separate in their own minds, and I don't think that a decision to reimpose the Mexico City policy implies anything about the broader attitudes of the administration toward development aid.

Q: But would it mean that one of the global issues the U.S. wouldn't tackle would be population?

A: Well, that's an interesting question. I found a silver lining in the way in which the Mexico City cloud was brought down on us again. And that is, in the explicit acknowledgment at the time the announcement was made that family planning is the best way to reduce abortions. George W. [Bush] is the first Republican head of state since [Gerald] Ford who has been willing to make a distinction between family planning and abortion. So I see that as an opening. This administration could substantially support family planning even as it opposes abortion.

Q: What are the selling points of your proposal?

A: I think an important selling point is that the American people, generally speaking, have strongly supported humanitarian assistance programs, programs that either directly relieve suffering or that give people the tools to improve their well-being. And what I am talking about falls squarely into that category. What public opinion has not supported are programs that are perceived to prop up regimes or otherwise to pursue foreign policy goals that are not themselves necessarily related to development. All the money that went to the Shah of Iran, or to the Marcos regime [in the Philippines], or to the Mobutu regime [in the former Zaire], where the purpose for providing the funds was relatively short-term foreign policy—Cold War foreign policy—as opposed to development, has made a lot of Americans very cynical. But if you ask Americans, do they support programs of child immunization or family planning or helping families increase food production or relieve hunger, there's still widespread support for programs that are perceived to do that effectively.

I also think that the partnership idea, of engaging institutions to which Americans broadly relate—their state universities and Land Grant colleges, NGOs to which they may contribute—to talk about the role of government as shifting from directly delivering packages of assistance, as in the Cold War context, to fostering and facilitating partnerships between American institutions and institutions in the developing world and enabling them to flourish is something that I think public opinion would quite strongly support.

Q: What challenges does the proposal have to overcome?

A: The big challenge is in making the case that there is a compelling need to do this, that there is a clear and present danger associated with a failure to act. What I've tried to do is argue that these global issues represent the dangers that we ought to be responding to, whether it's communicable diseases or a deteriorating environment, or continuing poverty and desperation that gives rise to radical political movements or terrorism. These now become the rationales on which a foreign aid program should be based.

There's also the implementation challenge. Everyone can agree that there's something fundamentally wrong with foreign aid, and the conversation immediately goes to 'What do we do about USAID?' or 'What do we do about the State Department?' or 'What do we do about the proliferation of agencies involved in this thing?' And people get locked into turf protection, into positions that have to do with these existing agencies, and you never get to the core questions of why we should continue to provide aid and what it ought to be about.

For those within USAID, the issue on which the biggest reservations lie is the shifting from a country to a global issues focus. That has real implications for the distribution of power within the agency. The centers of power have always been the regional bureaus. My proposal would basically place the central authority in the hands of the people who develop the strategies to address these global issues, where geographic allocations would become secondary to the allocations by global issue. The regional bureaus would lose a great deal of their traditional power in that process. ■